

THE WILD NORTHWEST Molenbeek, the Brussels art scene's new frontier

by Sarah Schug



View over Molenbeek with MIMA in the foreground.
The canal separates the neighborhood and the center of Brussels © MIMA.



Above: Calculated Chance at Soci t , Marine Hugonnier, Robert Filliou   Leslie Artamonov.
Below: Modus Operandi at Soci t , Sol LeWitt, Walter De Maria, David Lamelas, Lawrence Weiner   Leslie Artamonov.

"When we bought this building in 2014, it had been standing empty for 10 years. No one realized the potential it had." Els Vermang is discussing the former electricity factory in Molenbeek that she, with several other artists, began to transform into an ambitious art hub long before the neighborhood with the rough reputation started to develop its growing status of underground cool. Six years later, the area is slowly turning into the city's next arts district.

"Already for the vernissage of the inaugural show, 400 people turned up," says co-founder Vermang, promptly dissipating any potential concerns about the location being too far from the city's major gallery stronghold in Ixelles, the uptown part of Brussels. Dubbed **Soci t **, paying homage to the long history of the property (built in the 1930s as Soci t  Bruxelloise d'Electricit ), it consists of ample, grittily beautiful exhibition spaces with adjacent workshops and living quarters situated around a beautiful courtyard that has regularly assembled sizable art crowds at its openings since

its launch in 2016. With its brainy, meticulously curated exhibitions combining emerging and local artists with international heavyweights such as Ellsworth Kelly or Hamish Fulton, the artist-run initiative quickly made a name for itself, even securing a spot in the VIP program of Art Brussels, the longstanding art fair.

"We weren't necessarily set on this neighborhood when we bought the premises. We just fell in love with this fantastic building. Industrial spaces of this size for an affordable price just don't exist in uptown Brussels. Since then, so much has changed here, which has been great for us. It's been like a domino effect," Vermang explains. "At the time of our arrival, we weren't even aware of the planned **Tour & Taxis** transformation." She's referring to the gigantic redeveloped industrial site a short walk away on the eastern border of Molenbeek, which includes not only the impressive, century-old warehouses of a former freight station which became the new home of **Art Brussels** four years ago, but also a large park,

a collective gardening project, a cafe, and more. At the moment, there's even a pedestrian bridge being built to further connect the neighborhood and the city center that are naturally divided by the Brussels canal. Named after LGBT activist Suzan Daniel, it is due to open in summer 2021.

Molenbeek hasn't always been on the receiving end of positive attention and uplifting government projects. Spanish artist Felix Luque, who has been working in the neighborhood since 2006 - first as a resident at **iMal**, the center for new media and digital arts, which reopened this year after major renovations, and later overseeing its Fablab, a digital fabrication workshop - explains. "Molenbeek had been very much forgotten, a poor and marginal neighborhood left to its own devices," he says. "It's still of a fragile social reality, but the fact that it now gets political and cultural attention is so important. Changes are happening and it can be a very positive thing for the people living here."



On the eastern border of Molenbeek lies Tour & Taxis, a gigantic redeveloped industrial site including a large park, a collective gardening project, a cafe, and more © Benjamin Struelens - Extensa.



The century-old warehouses of a former freight station now host longstanding art fair Art Brussels © Benjamin Struelens - Extensa.

Whereas Société's unexpected top-flight neighbor Art Brussels, which attracts about 25,000 art enthusiasts, only descends upon the area for a couple of days per year, the neighborhood is in the process of turning into a year-round artistic hotbed in its own right. While it gained widespread notoriety in the wake of the Paris and Brussels terrorist attacks in 2015 and 2016, and foreign publications were busy asking if Molenbeek was a no-go zone and listing reasons why not to visit, Brussels' north has quietly been transforming into the Belgian capital's most interesting art spot.

With the Brussels art scene growing and flourishing as a whole, it's no surprise that it has started looking for new playgrounds and spreading out geographically. Initiatives being pushed out of the city center find new, less precarious, cheaper, and bigger homes in Molenbeek. The legendary **Recyclart**, a multidisciplinary arts center formerly occupying the buildings of Bruxelles-Chapelle station in the Marolles area, was forced to leave, and since 2018 has inhabited 4,000 square meters in an abandoned paper factory, just a stone's throw from the canal. Besides its cultural ambitions, it has a restaurant-bar and metal and wood workshops, which also serve as a means to offer socio-economic inclusion projects.

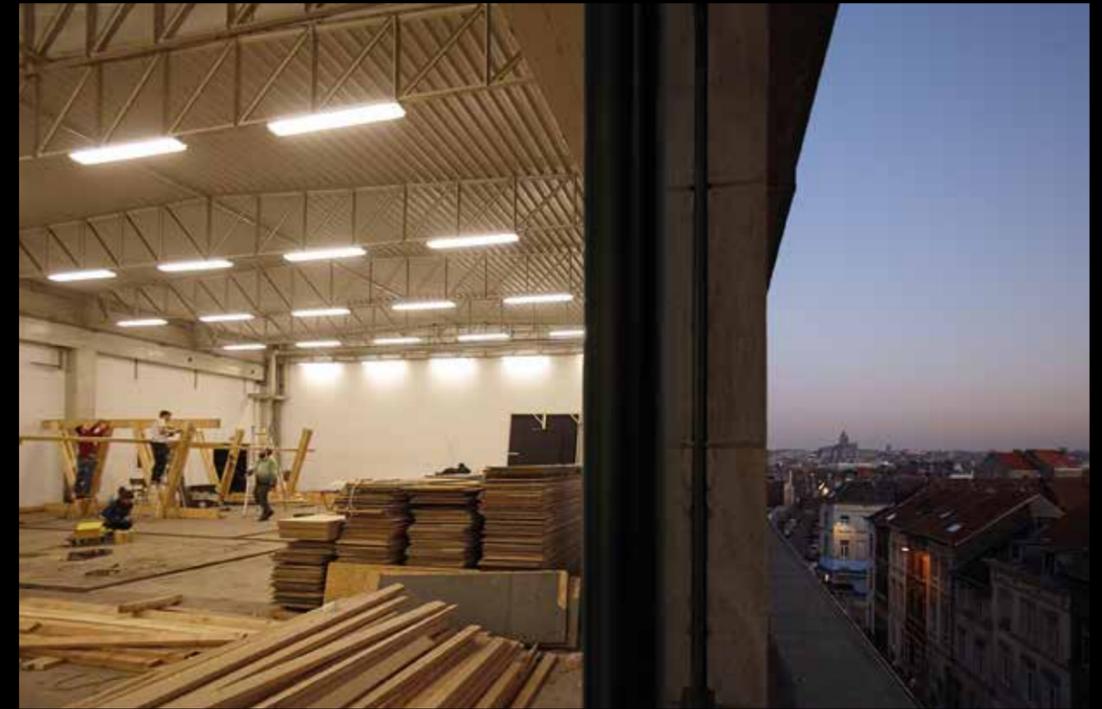
It's undoubtedly in good company: Concert venue **Vk**, contemporary dance center **Charleroi Danse**, cross-disciplinary art experiment **Decoratelier**, and pop-up cinema **Cinemaximiliaan**, which brings film-related activities

to refugee centers, are all in the same street. **Kunstenfestivaldesarts**, although cancelled this year due to the pandemic, made a point of choosing Recyclart as headquarters for its own renowned art festival, announcing on Twitter: "This year we are consciously locating the festival center to Molenbeek, to empower the existing initiatives based here."

Another local initiative is **LaVallée**, a creative hub attracted by the less precarious prospects, large industrial spaces, and low prices. "A building of this size and on a long-term basis, that's something we'd never find anywhere else," says Pierre Pevée, its director. "We signed a contract for 28 years - a kind of stability that is extremely important and very rare to find. We're not used to that." LaVallée first opened in 2014 in what used to be an industrial laundry company. Today, its 6,000 square meters accommodate artist studios, co-working spaces and a large exhibition and performance space. It gives more than 150 residents - ranging from sculptors, painters, and architects to graphic and fashion designers, journalists, and artisans - a place to work while building a formidable creative community. Having resided there for six years already, Pevée has witnessed the neighborhood evolving first-hand. "There clearly have been changes. Ten years ago, there weren't any lofts around the canal. And although it remains an area with a lot of poverty, there are new people moving here, especially younger ones in their 30s. That wasn't the case before. We might be in the middle of a shift of the creative scene from Saint-Gilles to Molenbeek."



Multidisciplinary arts center Recyclart was forced to leave its former home in the Marolles area and since 2018 has inhabited 4,000 square meters in an abandoned paper factory in Molenbeek © Y.A. Recyclart.



LaVallée first opened in 2014 in what used to be an industrial laundry company. Its 6,000 square meters accommodate artist studios, co-working spaces and a large exhibition and performance space.
 Above: Exhibition view La Poussière des Météores, 2019 © Stephan Balleux.
 Below: An exhibition opening at LaVallée © Joëlle Lé.

Studio with a View, a shared workplace with stunning vistas gathering 10 artists and designers in the defunct Bottelarij Belle-Vue © Nico Nees.



Paul Kusseneers moved his gallery from Antwerp to Molenbeek in 2013.
Above: Carla Arocha, Stéphane Schraenen, Nicolas Kozakis © Paul Kusseneers Gallery.
Below: The Human Condition, duo exhibition with Tom Poelmans and Michaël De Clercq © Paul Kusseneers Gallery.

And understandably so. With so much affordable available space, it's a paradise for artists, many of whom live in unstable financial situations. But that's by no means the only reason, as Felix Luque clarifies. "I really like the atmosphere here, and that it's a neighborhood that is culturally and socially diverse," he says. "That is something very enriching." Currently, 28.3% of the population are of foreign nationalities. For the past three years, the Spanish artist has been working on his installations and sculptures that explore humanity's relationship with technology at **Studio with a View**, a shared workplace with stunning vistas gathering 10 artists and designers in the defunct Bottelarij Belle-Vue, where the emblematic Belgian beer used to be mixed and bottled until the early 1990s. They have been in the premises, which also hosts an African church, a theatre school, and a couple of other initiatives, since 2012, benefitting from a level of stability uncommon in the cultural sector.

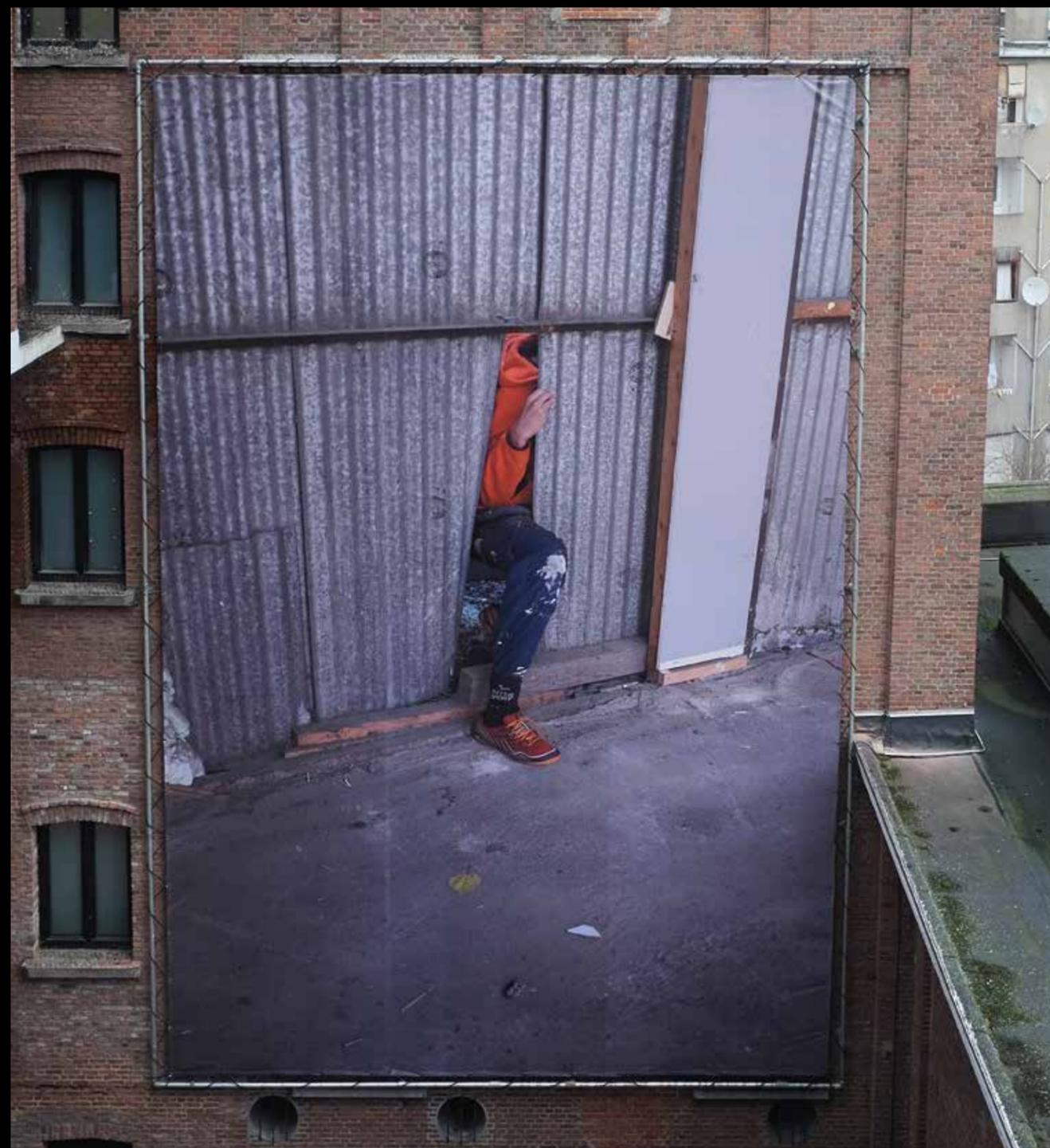
For his next major solo show, *Machines & Fictions*, Luque won't have to travel far: It will open this January at **MIMA**, the Millennium Iconoclast Museum of Art, which is located in Belle-Vue's disused main brewery building only a couple of minutes from his studio. Originally scheduled to be inaugurated

on 23 March 2016 - the day after the Brussels attacks which claimed the lives of 32 people and were later linked to a terror cell in Molenbeek - MIMA opened for the first time in April that year. As the neighborhood's first art museum, the beautiful 100-year-old red-brick structure ignited a lot of hope and excitement. Its program is dedicated to 'Culture 2.0', focusing on art reflecting the internet age and offering an unconventional mix of geek culture, graphic design, street art, and more. "We're not an ordinary museum," says co-founder Raphaël Cruyt, one of the creative minds behind the project. "Our exhibitions touch a different, younger audience: 30% of the population here is under 25. This location is logical for us and reflects our intentions, our identity." Indeed, shows related to a bottom-up genre such as street art make more sense in Molenbeek than in increasingly bourgeois Ixelles, for example. "When we opened our first exhibition, it reminded me of Brooklyn 20 years ago," remembers Cruyt, who has been living in the quarter behind the museum for more than 15 years. "I love the multicultural, friendly atmosphere. It's still the far west, a bit wild. A great place to live that welcomes everyone. Needless to say, we developed programs to engage with the local community. But personally, the best way for me to foster exchange has been working out at the local boxing club."

Although MIMA's flagship presence has done a lot to better the neighborhood's image, it cannot claim full pioneer status. That belongs to **Paul Kusseneers**, who moved his gallery from Antwerp to Molenbeek in 2013. "It's the same as with the East End in London or Chelsea in New York," says the seasoned gallerist, sitting in his office next to a gleaming white 600-square-meter exhibition space, where an extensive solo show by emerging Belgian painter Michaël De Clercq is being mounted. "In Ixelles' Avenue Louise for example, we'd be working in a shoebox. A gallery should be of certain dimensions, so that an artist can really show something. Plus, I prefer a low-profile, tricky neighborhood; it's certainly a much more interesting environment, especially for young artists." Was he ever worried about being too far from the city's usual art circuit? "No. I've never believed in being successful by being in close proximity to other galleries. You have to find your own clients and collectors. People who come here, they come because they really want to see the show." Surely, a lot has changed since he first set his eyes on the old mustard factory. Kusseneers: "I thought there was no way around more and more galleries coming to this area. Right now, you can still find places like ours, but prices are going up. It's growing, slowly but constantly."



Above: Oscar van der Put © Paul Kusseneers Gallery.
Wonderland or the Art of Rebellion at MIMA, Akay & Olabo, Panopticon © MIMA.



Akay & Olabo at MIMA, Advertisement for escape © MIMA.



The Millennium Iconoclast Museum of Art, located in the former Belle-Vue brewery, is dedicated to 'Culture 2.0', focusing on art reflecting the internet age and offering an unconventional mix of geek culture, graphic design, street art, and more.
Above: Joan Cornella © MIMA.
Below: Nomads, Akay & Olabo © MIMA.



Artist Marcin Dudek exploring Harlan Levey Projects' new gallery space in Molenbeek © Harlan Levey Projects.

The signs are all there: The former industrial production center seems to be developing into a cultural one. Once a cradle of substantial industrial activity, especially around the canal and the railway, which even earned it the nickname 'Little Manchester', a nod to England's industrial powerhouse, today it is one of Belgium's poorest municipalities. The neighborhood, home to a diverse population of about 90,000, never recovered from the de-industrialization that eliminated thousands of jobs.

It's in no way a new story. Defunct industry has become synonymous with opportunities for the art and culture sector, and when the artists arrive, gentrification is generally not far around the corner. In Molenbeek, however, most corners are still graced by long-established little vegetable shops, fishmongers, and butchers. So far, the hipster wave hasn't hit, although there are some early indications, as Swiss artist Darren Roshier has noticed. He has been living and working in the area for the past three years, attracted by its affordability and the growing community of artists. "I have the impression that the locals understand exactly what's happening," says Roshier. "Next to my home, a local family has opened a cafe called Brunchy with what's considered a hipster interior, and a Moroccan coffee shop on Chaussée de Gand has transformed itself

into a carbon copy of Starbucks. It's almost like they are trying to preempt the impending gentrification."

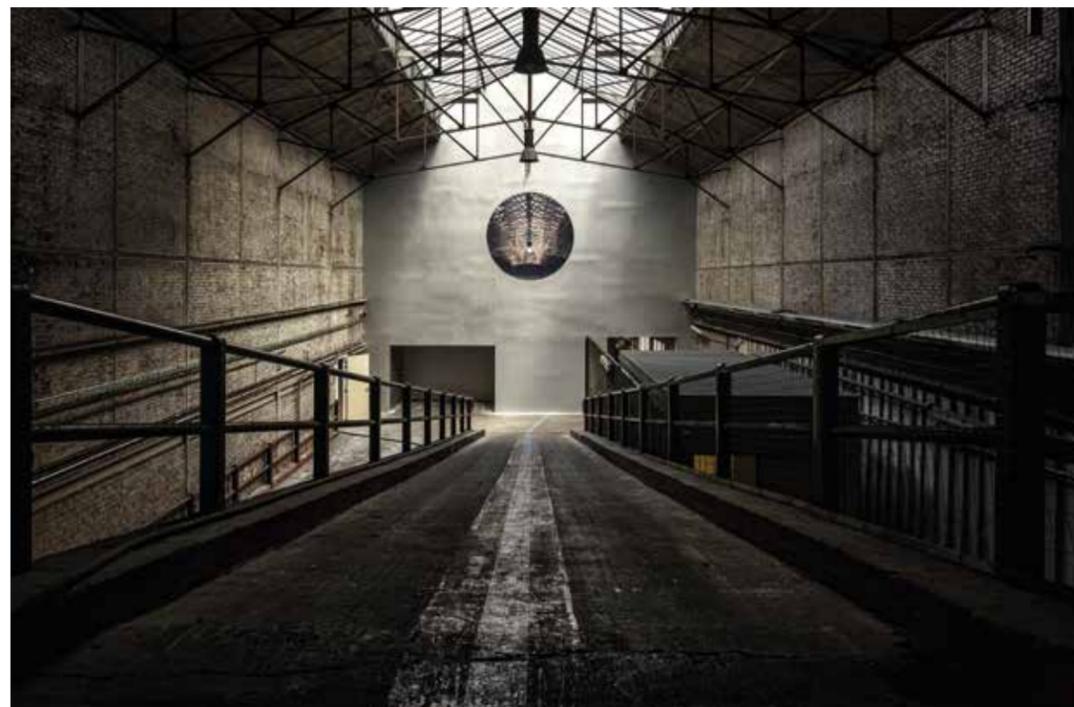
Having watched the aggressive transformations in other capital cities from London to New York from afar, Brussels art-worlders are sensitive to the challenges and risks it brings. Yes, art and culture can transform neighborhoods – but is it always for the better? It's a subject that has been on Roshier's mind a lot. "I am part of the problem," he says. "If we artists are the first step, where's the limit? I'm not sure how to solve it, but I do know that we need to integrate better, be part of the community, and use potential privileges to help." Personally, he decided to join the local division of a political party. "I don't just want to suck the positive things out of the neighborhood. The first time I went knocking on doors, meeting people living in social housing, I felt more legitimate," he says.

Nevertheless, in the case of Molenbeek, this fear of hostile gentrification might be unfounded. "Brussels is not like Paris or New York, where change is fast, aggressive, more visible, and irreversible," Cruyt, almost a local himself at this point, weighs in. "Already 10 years ago, when a few new projects settled down in Rue Antoine Dansaert on the other side of the canal in the center, people were

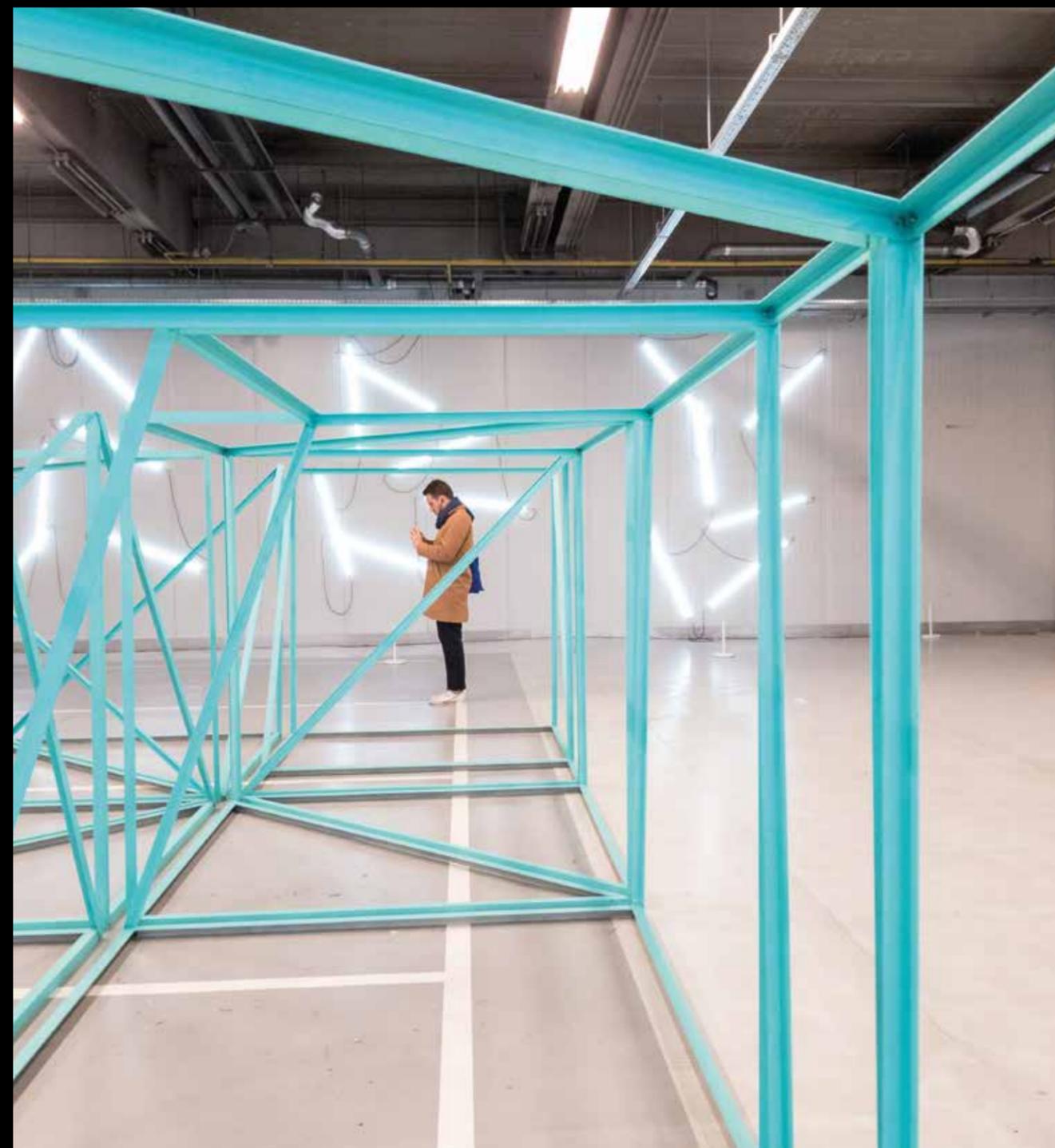
scared. But it never happened. I am seeing a very positive dynamic today."

Someone else attracted by that dynamic is Harlan Levey, who has consistently been building up **Harlan Levey Projects** on the ground floor of a typical Ixelles townhouse, making a name for himself with an intelligent, international, and often politically charged program. Currently on view: *Slash & Burn*, a solo show by Polish, Brussels-based artist Marcin Dudek, who examines hooligan subculture, mass events, and crowd dynamics. (His studio is - where else? - in Molenbeek.)

Come January, Levey is set to open a second, much bigger space in the neighborhood, delayed a couple of months due to Covid. Situated in a former warehouse, it extends over 250 square meters. "It fits our budget, our project, and our ambitions. It's an opportunity. It's like with Chelsea in the 70s, when nobody wanted to go there, or Bushwick more recently, to use the example of New York. It's what you can afford, without thinking about what people might like or not," Levey says. After Kusneers, he's only the second commercial gallery ready to take the plunge. To differentiate between his two spaces, Levey named them after their respective local postcodes: 1050 for Ixelles and 1080 for Molenbeek.



The city's new artistic flagship project Kanal - Centre Pompidou, sitting on Molenbeek's edge in the historic Citroën showrooms.
John Armleder, It Never Ends, Kanal - Centre Pompidou, © Veerle Vercauteren.



Paolo, Foresta metallica, 1967,
Kanal - Centre Pompidou, Icaro © Veerle Vercauteren.

The four-digit number has become increasingly hip with the artist crowd, who proudly wear 1080 baseball caps. But for others, it signifies a reason for job discrimination. Studies revealed that having the 1080 postcode on your CV considerably decreases your chances of finding work - especially when your last name is not a traditionally Belgian one. Fortunately, almost all the above-mentioned art venues are trying to bridge a potential cultural divide with numerous outreach and inclusion programs.

The city's new artistic flagship project **Kanal - Centre Pompidou**, sitting on Molenbeek's edge on the other side of the canal in the historic Citroën showrooms, is strikingly focused on local dynamics as well. "We're very aware of our surroundings, and don't want to be in an ivory tower," says its director, Yves Goldstein. "It's not conceived as a traditional museum. We even organized hip-hop and graffiti workshops here. We want this to be a space with open doors that champions diversity and reaches a new audience, not just the usual suspects." The current John Armleder art spectacle, *It Never Ends*, encompasses an

extensive, interdisciplinary program directed at all kinds of audiences and is a testament to this approach. Several parts, including an experimental library and printing workshops, are freely accessible seven days a week. The celebrated Swiss artist's project is the last one before the building undergoes the final stage of renovations. The future modern and contemporary art museum conceived in partnership with Paris's Centre Pompidou is scheduled to open in spring 2024.

While it's a bit too early to call Brussels' wild northwest the city's new gallery district, it is undeniably turning into a fruitful artistic breeding ground inundated with interesting initiatives. "Molenbeek has certainly become part of the Brussels art scene and is very relevant to our program. We're planning on offering an art walk through the neighborhood next year," says Sybille du Roy, director of the city's annual gallery weekend. Anne Vierstraete, director of Art Brussels, agrees: "It's undoubtedly worth visiting. There are so many interesting things happening." At the same time, just like Cruyt, she calms concerns about gentrification. "This

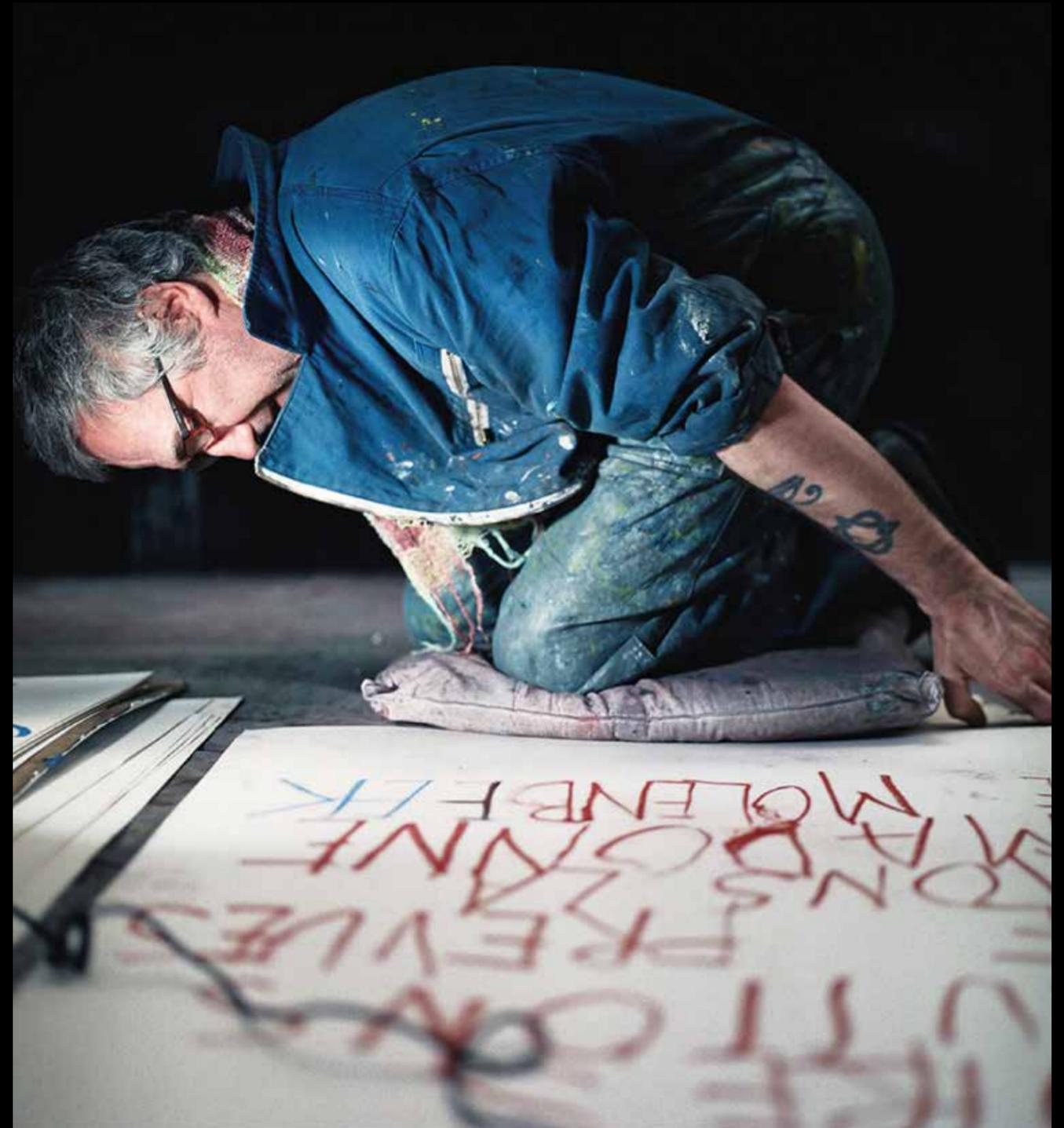
area has been permanently up-and-coming, so to speak. There has been talk about it for 20, even 30 years. In the 2000s, there were already the same worries, when more than a dozen galleries moved into a large building at the canal." Ultimately, the project, which included emblematic galleries such as Albert Baronian, was discontinued and the feared swift transformation never materialized.

In its place, the neighborhood seems to be undergoing a soft, long-term, and hopefully sustainable transition. Both Roshier and Luque are primarily attributing it to the fact that many locals own the houses they live in, and in some cases have done for generations. "In my view, this is the most singular socio-economic aspect of Brussels. It makes it impossible to push people out by aggressively raising rents as we've been seeing it in other cities, and prevents a radical overhaul. It's positive for those who are already here, but also for the new ones coming in," says Luque.

So far, it looks like Molenbeek has the chance to rewrite the classic gentrification story arc.



Above: The freely accessible library at Kanal - Centre Pompidou, part of John Armleder, *It Never Ends* © Veerle Vercauteren.
Below: Kanal - Centre Pompidou in the former Citroën building © Veerle Vercauteren.



Artist-run space Soci t  is located in a former electricity factory.
Above: Dennis Oppenheim, Casey Reas, Claude Rutault © Leslie Artamonov.
Below: Aurelie Nemours, John Armleder © Freddy Dhoe.

Philippe Vandenberg in his studio in Molenbeek © Jean-Pierre Stoop.

Addresses

**Charleroi Danse
at La Raffinerie**
Rue de Manchester 21
charleroi-danse.be

Cinemaximiliaan
Rue de Manchester 36
cinemaximiliaan.org

Decoratelier
Rue de Manchester 17
damagedgoods.be

Harlan Levey Projects
Rue Isidoor Teirlinck 65
hl-projects.com

iMal
Quai des Charbonnages 30
imal.org

**Kanal -
Centre Pompidou**
Square Saintelette 21
kanal.brussels

LaVallée
Rue Adolphe Lavallée 39
facebook.com/lavalleebl

MIMA
Quai du Hainaut 41
mimamuseum.eu

**Paul Kusseneers
Gallery**
Rue de Menin 10
kusseneers.com

Recyclart
Rue de Manchester 15
recyclart.be

Société
Rue Vanderstichelen 106
societe-d-electricite.com

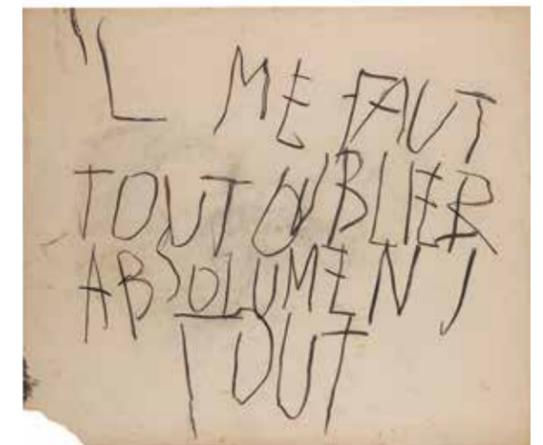
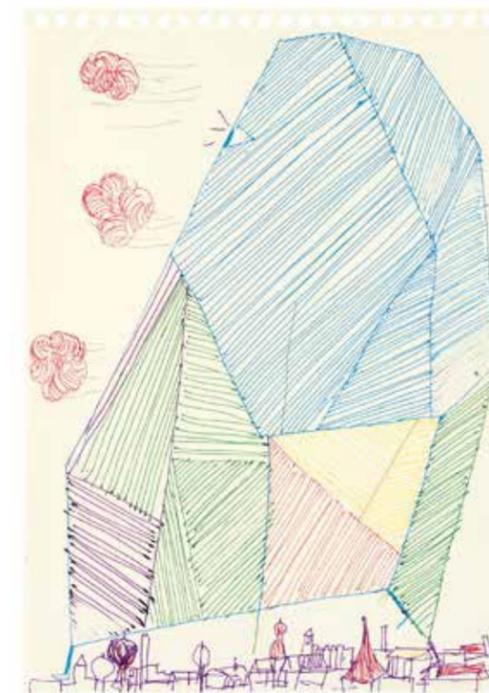
Tour & Taxis
Avenue du Port 86C
tour-taxis.com

Vk
Rue de Manchester 13
vkconcerts.be

Philippe Vandenberg's Molenbeek

"Molenbeek" is also the title of a captivating exhibition currently on view at Brussels' Bozar. The solo show shines a light on the works that Belgian artist Philippe Vandenberg (1952-2009) created during the last years of his life, which he spent in Molenbeek. Uniting more than 300 drawings, it's an eyewitness report of sorts that blends interior and exterior conflicts, juxtaposing the artist's inner life, the neighborhood that surrounds him, and global conflicts. It's a wild, colorful mix of thoughts and ideas, ranging from weighty Oscar Wilde quotes to satirical Hitler references. Vibrant pastels playfully clash with gloomy subject matters, addressing war, dictatorship, and the rise of the extreme right. Molenbeek finds its way into Vandenberg's works in different ways: as a topic and as a material object. The artist was acutely aware of the area's social realities, where he spent a lot of time not only in his studio but also taking hours-long walks, always equipped with a caddy to pick up boxes, canvasses, posters, or pieces of wood that he would integrate into his works. His daughter Hélène, who has been taking care of her father's estate, describes it as "shopping for ideas," adding: "He loved Molenbeek. He saw it as such an inspiring and creative place, a microcosm that represents the world. The hundreds of different cultures you can find there make it very rich. My father used it as a platform to humorously address universal issues: hate, racism, pain, our place in the world. His art has always been about the human condition."

Molenbeek
Bozar,
Rue Ravenstein 23, 1000 Brussels
Until January 3
bozar.be



Above: Philippe Vandenberg at Bozar, exhibition view © Philippe De Gobert.
Below: © Estate Philippe Vandenberg.